



BY PATTI GRECO



The Wigmaker

WHEN THIS WALL STREET EXECUTIVE BEAT CANCER, SHE DITCHED HER SIX-FIGURE SALARY AND SET UP A WIG COMPANY TO HELP WOMEN LIKE HERSELF

Sheril Cohen, 42, describes her first wig-shopping experience as harried and demoralizing. In a month she would start an aggressive course of chemotherapy to fight the cancer that had spread to her lymph nodes. She knew that her hair would fall out soon afterward. “I was adamantly private about my cancer,” Cohen says. “When you lose your hair, you’re outed.”

The salesman at the upscale New York wig store showed her its stock, told her she’d never find a wig to match her own long black hair, then ushered her out—he had another customer. Even at stores where the salespeople weren’t so abrupt, Cohen says, “It was like trying on bathing suits in a parking lot.”

She eventually bought three wigs and even sewed one hair-piece into a baseball cap to wear while running. But the memories of her humiliating shopping experiences stayed with Cohen and, ultimately, inspired her to start her own business. Girl on the Go, launched in December 2003, offers at-home wig consultation, fitting and styling.

Cohen, who runs the business from her home in Clifton Park,



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New York, once earned big money as a marketing executive. Life was all about work: “I’d wake up at six o’clock, go running, get to the office at 9:30, work for 12 hours and eat dinner on the way back to my Manhattan apartment,” she says. She’d been at a new job for only a month when she realized that the hard lumps she’d felt on her torso two months earlier had grown. “I panicked, of course, but I was also kind of stoic,” Cohen says. “I intuitively knew I had cancer.” Her mother had died seven years earlier of pancreatic cancer, and Cohen spent her first year out of grad school taking care of her. “The week before I found the lumps, I woke up in the middle of the night, alone, to a kiss on the cheek,” she says. “I hadn’t felt those lips in so long, but I knew they were my mom’s. She was coming to protect me from the bad news I was about to hear.”

Doctors struggled for six weeks to target the disease’s primary location, finally deciding to treat Cohen as a breast cancer patient. She started chemo and threw herself into work. “I was sick, but insane about getting things done,” she says. “I’d gotten so far in my career, and I didn’t want all my accomplishments to just go away.” At first her hair shed on her pillow; then the curls began to fall out more easily—she’d find them on her computer keyboard. Finally, on a Sunday night at her sister’s house in New Jersey, the hair started coming out in

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fistfuls. “My three-year-old nephew touched my ponytail, and it felt like the whole thing was going to fall off. So my sister and I cut it off,” she says. “I hated that moment in my life.” For more than two months, Cohen wore a wig to work. “One or two people said they liked it,” she recalls. “Maybe they were trying to be supportive, but pointing out my wig just made me feel belittled.

RUNNING THE NUMBERS

— **30** hours Cohen spends talking to customers on the phone each week

— **100,000** hairs on a human scalp

— **175,000** hairs in a synthetic wig

— **\$90** average cost for a pound of high-quality, shoulder-length human hair

— **600** clients Cohen has helped in four years

— **\$25,000** spent to launch the business

I was grabbing every single cell of courage I had to go to work and feel normal.” Finally, in March 2001, four months after her diagnosis, she went on disability leave. “I was trying to arrange chemo around traveling,” she says. “Then my oncologist told me, ‘Work or live.’”

Cohen underwent 13 months of treatments, including a bone marrow transplant, and was declared cancer-free in January 2002. She returned to work that March, assuming she’d settle into her old life without a hitch. But her experience had changed her. “I just didn’t care whose team got the

budget and who was sitting to the left of the senior vice president,” she says. The upside of returning to the office: Coworkers confided in Cohen about their own sick friends and family and their trouble finding wigs. Cohen guided some of the women through the process. “It dawned on me that cancer patients were desperate for help.”

Using her head

There’s no shortage of wig shops around the country, many selling famous brands at prices that range from \$100 for basic acrylic to \$7,000 for human hair. “But they’re trying to sell you what they have instead of what you need,” Cohen says. So she developed what she calls the Mary Kay model: A client requests a wig and one of the seven Girl on the Go representatives visits her home to fit her with it—no fluorescent lights, no crowds, no rushed salesmen. “People turn to us because we understand what they’re going through,” she says. “Plus, they connect with my story.”

Before launching her company, Cohen spent almost a year researching the wig industry and looking for a manufacturer that sold quality products. “There are all kinds of cheap, horrible wigs out there,” she says. “Those might be fine for making a Friday night fashion statement, but they won’t last a year.” Cohen sampled hundreds of pieces from China, Korea, Belgium, Poland, New York and Florida—spending about \$6,000 along the way—and finally chose a Brooklyn-based manufacturer and wholesaler. Today she has two additional vendors that supply only what she needs. “I don’t want to buy in bulk, because I don’t want to be stuck having 20 blond wigs to unload,”



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she says. She also has two New York freelancers who handcraft wigs for her. A wig knotted with human hair sells for about \$3,600 through Girl on the Go; synthetic wigs start at \$500.

With a manufacturer on board, Cohen had brochures printed by the thousands and mailed them to about 100 medical offices, hoping doctors would display them in their waiting rooms. “The response was pretty much zero,” she says. “It was hugely disappointing.” Some doctors didn’t want to be seen as endorsing Cohen’s products or held responsible for any defects in them; others objected to her prices. One director of a not-for-profit cancer center in Boston was especially discouraging. “She thought displaying our brochure in her lobby would be damaging to a woman’s soul because it’s not about what you look like on the outside, it’s about the strength you have on the inside,” Cohen remembers. She finally got a break when her own oncologist, Linda Vahdat, MD, of Weill Cornell Medical College, agreed to place Girl on the Go brochures in her office. “We handed them out gingerly at first to see if the business got good feedback,” Vahdat says. “We were amazed by the response.”

Growing her company

Cohen stayed at her job for a year after starting her business. “I did my work at the bank, but I was no longer a star performer,” she says. She’d whittled 12-hour days down to eight and spent her free time tending to her start-up. Sales didn’t quite reach \$20,000 that year, not even enough to cover her more than \$2,000 monthly rent. Nonetheless, Cohen quit her job, moved out of her apartment and shuttled for two years among her sister’s house in New Jersey, her dad’s house in Albany, New York, and her now ex-boyfriend’s house in Boston. She lived on her savings.

Sales more than quadrupled in year two, and this year they’re projected to hit \$250,000. Cohen plans to pay herself \$18,000 and plow the rest back into the company, which now has representatives in five cities, including Albany and San Bernardino, California. For clients living in areas without reps, Cohen offers a service called Look Just Like You. Women send Cohen a hair swatch and a few pictures; Cohen sends them a wig to match their look. One woman, diagnosed with cancer for the

third time, used the service before going to a friend’s wedding. “She was feeling fat and ugly from her medication and didn’t want to go wig shopping in public,” Cohen says. As a thank-you, the client sent Cohen pictures of herself beaming at the reception.

Another client, Joan Kaplan, a 58-year-old global marketer for Pfizer pharmaceuticals, requested Cohen’s standard service almost two years ago, after being diagnosed with breast cancer for the second time. “I travel for business and constantly meet people. I have to look normal,” Kaplan says. Cohen even held Kaplan’s hand when the last of her hair was shaved from her head. These days, Cohen rarely goes on consultations (stylists and representatives do the job). She has hired a phone center to field her calls—“a level of success in itself,” she says. And her sister, Rhonda, works for the business, helping schedule appointments, among other things. Still, Cohen spends a large part of her day on the phone, speaking with customers. “I’m part therapist, part wig saleswoman,” she says.

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Cohen extended her own support system in late 2005, when she met the man who’s now her husband, Greg, 41, a computer networker at Von Roll USA in Schenectady, New York. His wife had recently died of cancer, leaving him with two children, Jake, 10, and Jordan, 13. “We were meant to find each other,” says Cohen, who had been left infertile by the bone marrow transplant. “Those kids needed a mom, and I needed to be a mom.” Once Jordan reaches high school—“when she’s not so easily distracted by the phone,” Cohen says—she may start working for the company. Jordan grins when asked if she ever tries on the wigs. “I wore one to school for three weeks,” she says. “Wig pride!”

While Cohen keeps a sketch of Wall Street in the foyer of her house, she has left her old life behind. She hopes to turn her company into a multimillion-dollar business. “I want to let people know that wearing a wig isn’t a death sentence,” she says. “I want my name to mean something to people.” **M**